

Unit Three: The Second and Third Buddhist Councils

The Second Buddhist Council

The Second Buddhist council also occupies an important place in the history of Buddhism, not because it was conducive to the solidity of Buddhism but because it paved the way to split the united Sangha into divisions. It was started not as a rehearsal of the teachings of the Buddha but as a disciplinary procedure against the misconducts adopted by a certain faction of Buddhist monks. It was held after a hundred years of the passing away of the Buddha at Vālukarāma of Vesāli with the participation of a thousand Arahants, according to Cullavagga. Samantapāsādikā of Buddhaghosa mentioned that the council was held over a period of eight months.

Earliest reference to the second council as in the case of the first council is provided by the Cullavagga. Its last chapter, *Sattasatikkhandhaka* is fully devoted to the description of the second council. Cullavagga narrated the story of the second council as follows:

After one hundred years of passing away of the Buddha, Vajjiputtaka monks in Vesāli have taken ten points for granted (which are unlawful according to the Buddhist disciplinary code). They are as follows:

- i *Singilonakappo kappati*. It is proper to carry salt in a horn to be used when it is needed.
- ii *Dvangukakappo kappati*. It is proper to take meals when the shadow is two inches long.
- iii *Gāmantarakappo kappati*. It is proper to take second meals having gone to another village in the same day after having taken and refused first meals in one village.
- iv *Āvāsakappo kappati*. It is proper to recite patimokkha in different residences within the same parish (*sīmā*)
- v *Anumatikappo kappati*. It is proper to take sanction (*chanda*) of the absentees after having performed the formal activities (*vinayakamma*).
- vi *Āciṇṇakappo kappati*. It is proper to accept customary practices as authoritative.
- vii *Amathitakappo kappati*. It is proper to drink milk-whey after meal.
- viii *Jalogi pātum kappati*. It is proper to drink palm-juice which is fermenting but not yet become toddy.
- ix *Adasaka-nisīdanam kappati*. It is proper to use borderless sheet to sit on.
- x *Jātarūparajataṃ kappati*. It is proper to accept gold and silver.

At the time, Venerable Kākandaputta Yasa, having come to the country of Vajjin, sojourned in Kūtāgārasālā in Mahāvana in Vesāli. On a Uposatha day, Vajjiputtaka monks collected gold and silver from the lay devotees in the manner that they kept a bowl in between the monks and ask devotees to put gold and silver into the bowl. Venerable Yasa declared to the devotees that money should not be given to the Sangha as it is unlawful. Vajjiputtaka monks came to meet Yasa with a share of the money collected by them and tried to offer that to Yasa. He did not accept it. Vajjiputtakās knowing that Yasa changed the mind of devotees on accepting money by the monks pronounced the penalty of Patisārāṇiya kamma against Yasa.

Patisārāṇiya kamma is a penalty for a monk who insults and blames householders and corrupts their faith. Guilty monk must apologise to them. Venerable Yasa further incited them in taking

his side instead of apologizing to them. Knowing that, the Vajjiputtaka monks pronounced the penalty of Ukkhepanīya kamma (excommunication) against him. Therefore, Venerable Yasa left for Kosambi and determined to take an action against the unlawful practice of Vajjiputtaka monks as it would lead to the deterioration of the Dhamma and Vinaya.

Yasa sent the messengers to the monks of Pātheyyaka and the monks of Avanti of Dakkhināpatha, asking them to meet him to discuss the matter. He himself went to meet elder Sambhūta Sānavāsī, who was residing at the Ahogangā Mountain. Yasa put forward the ten points to get the opinion of the elder Sānavāsī, and elder Sānavāsī declared that all the ten points were illegal and unlawful. Meanwhile, about sixty Pātheyyaka monks and eighty eight Avanti monks of Dakkhināpatha, who were all Arahants arrived there at the place of Ahogangā.

All the monks who gathered there discussed the gravity of the step that they were going to take against the Vajjiputtaka monks. They wanted to be more precise and accurate about their stand on the ten points. Therefore, they looked for a more authoritative monk to get his decision over the ten points. They learned about a Mahāthera by the name of Revata, who was well-versed in Dhamma and Vinaya and was celebrated for his religious life, living at Soreyya. They proceeded to meet elder Revata at Soreyya, however, elder Revata knowing that the monks went to meet him, left Soreyya for Vesāli in order to meet them there. Before he reached Vesali, the monks met him in Sahajāti, where they placed the ten points before him. Venerable Revata taking the points one by one into his account declared all of them as illegal.

In the mean time, Vajjiputtaka monks also approached elder Revata with many monks' requisites as gifts, with the intention of winning him over to their side. But, elder Revata humbly refused to accept their gifts. Though they tried their best, they were unable to turn him over to their side.

Finally, monks gathered for the settlement of the problem. At the meeting of the monks, elder Revata informed the Sangha that if the Sangha settles this problem at the place where it arose, it could not be opened up again as a legal question. Agreeing with Revata, all the monks amounting to seven hundred proceeded to Vesāli for the settlement of the question based on the ten points.

When they gathered in Vesāli, there arose endless opinions and disputes, which were not meaningful, among the monks over the ten points. On that occasion, Venerable Revata suggested to settle the legal question by means of a referendum (committee). All the monks agreed to examine the ten points by means of a committee comprised of four monks from Pātheyyaka (westerners) section and four monks from Pācīnaka (easterners) section as suggested by elder Revata. With the consent of the Sangha, elder Sabbakāmi, elder Sālha, elder Khujjasobhita and elder Vasabha-gāmika were appointed from the Pācīnaka monks. Elder Revata, elder Sānavāsī Sambhūta, elder Kākandaputta Yasa and elder Sumana were appointed from the Pātheyyaka monks for the committee.

Valikārāma of Vesāli was selected as the venue of the council. Elder Revata and elder Sabbakāmi were given consent by the Sangha to ask the question and to answer the questions respectively. Then elder Revata directed the ten points one by one in the form of a question (for instance, as to whether carrying salt in a horn was proper) towards the elder Sabbakāmi in the committee. Elder Sabbakāmi referring each point to the code of discipline of the Sangha declared each of the ten points as unlawful according to the Vinaya of the monks. When the session of the

committee was over, elder Revata again asked the questions relating to the ten points from elder Sabbakāmi in the presence of the whole body of the assembly. Elder Sabbakāmi gave the verdict to the effect that all the ten points were illegal and unlawful.

According to the Cullavagga account, the proceeding of the council ended with the declaration of the unlawfulness of the ten points accepted by the Vajjin monks. Buddhaghosa's account in the Samantapāsādikā reveals that after the declaration of the judgment on the ten points all the seven hundred Bhikkhus together recited the Dhamma and vinaya classifying them into *pitaka*, *nikaya*, *anga* and *dharmakkhandha* during the period of eight months.¹

Samantapāsādikā and Dipavamsa, a Srilankan chronical, referred to King Kalasoka, son of Susunaga, under whose reign the second council was held. Mahavastu, the Vinaya of Mahisasaka confirmed most of the facts given in the accounts of the Pali tradition except the name of the president and the subject matter of the council. Regarding the name of the venue, Vajjins' monks' un-disciplinary behavior, excommunication of Yasa and the number of the monks participating in the council, Mahavastu quite tallies with Culavagga. But it differs mainly from Cullavagga in respect of the president and the subject matter of the council. According to Mahavastu, while Venerable Daśabala acted as the president, the Vinaya Pitaka was recited by the monks as the work of the council.

Vasumitra, Bhavya and Vinitadeva quite strangely give different accounts about the council. According to them, the united Sangha were separated into two divisions namely, Sthavira and Masanghika due to the five weaknesses of Arahants accepted by a monk called Mahadava. Five propositions which talk about the weaknesses of Arahants as accepted by Mahadava are as follows:

- 1 An Arahant may have temptation
- 2 An Arahant may have the ignorance
- 3 An Arahant may have doubt on doctrinal matters
- 4 An Arahant attain Arahantship with the help of others
- 5 An Arahant attain the Arahantship with by an exclamation of 'Aho'.

Though we are not certain of the fact whether those five points of Mahadeva caused the schism among the monks at the time of second Buddhist council or not, it is certain that such views were accepted by Mahasanghikas, even at the time of the third council, which was held during the reign of King Asoka. Kathavatthupparakara, which was compiled by elder Tissa who was the president of the third council, had rejected the following views of Mahasanghikas:

- Atthi arahato rago (arahant has the lust)
- Atthi arahato abbanam (arahant has the ignorance)
- Atthi arahato kankankha (arahant has the doubt)
- Atthi arahato paravitarana. (Arahant gets the help of others for the attainment of Arahantship).

Paramartha gave an account of the second council in a slightly different way. According to him, there was a council at Pataliputra, 166 years after passing away of the Buddha. Elder Baspa presided over the council. In the council Mahadeva wanted to incorporate Mahayana sutras into the three pitaka and he further presented his opinion regarding the weaknesses of the Arahants.

The controversy arose over Mahadeva's attempt, thus leading the Sangha to have a division among themselves.

The second Buddhist council has been accepted as a genuine historical event which occurred in the history of Indian Buddhism by scholars. All the accounts pertaining to this council, though they differ in some respects, are unanimous about its occurring in the Sasana. Further it is attested by the existence of various Buddhist schools, which were the offshoots of the first two divisions of the monks (Sthavira and Mahasanghika), said to have risen as a result of the council.

Third Buddhist Council

The Third Buddhist council was held in Pāṭaliputra under the reign of Emperor Aśoka after three centuries of the Parinirvāṇa of the Buddha. It was really a council belonging to the Theravāda or Vibhajjavāda Buddhist Order. Therefore, this council represents only a need of the Theravāda Buddhist monks of the day. Buddhaghosa in his Samantapāsādikā commentary to Vinaya, provides a detailed account of the council along with its background, which necessitated the occasion for the council.

According to Buddhaghosa, after the conversion of Aśoka into Buddhism, members of the Buddhist Order flourished with gain and fame. The King supported Buddhist monks providing them with immense facilities and requisites. Other heretical religious groups suffered a lot in losing their gain and fame because of the lack of attention of the King towards them. Therefore, the members of the other heretical groups disguised as real Buddhist monks and entered into the Buddhist Order on their own accord with the intention of regaining their material prosperity. But they did not give up their old religious faiths and practices and started to propagate those wrong views as the teachings of the Buddha. Further they moved with real Buddhist monks and mixed up with them even in the religious activities of the Saṅgha such as *Uposatha*, *Pavāraṇā* and other formal activities.

When the Order became increasingly corrupt with the intrusion of heretics, Venerable Moggaliputta Tissa, who was then chief monk of the Order, became deeply distressed with the situation and left Pāṭaliputra for Ahogangā Mountain to do a secluded retreat. Other monks of the Order stopped their formal activities because of the involvements of heretical monks in such activities. It is said that there was no *Uposatha Kamma* in monasteries for seven years due to this reason. When the matter was brought to the notice of King Aśoka, he wanted to settle the issue as soon as possible. So, he commanded a minister to take action to the effect that monks perform the *Uposatha* in the monasteries. However, the minister misunderstood the command of the king, went to the monastery and forced the monks to perform *Uposatha*. When the monks refused to do so with the heretical monks, the minister, thinking that the monks disobeyed the king's order, beheaded several monks.

The minister returned to the palace and informed the king of what he had done. Hearing this grave crime that the minister had done, the king was deeply filled with sorrow and approached the monks in the monastery. He asked the monks whether he was responsible for the sin mistakenly done by the minister. The monks were not unanimous with the decision. Some

monks answered affirmatively and some negatively. The king was not satisfied with the answers at all. So, he inquired the monks as to whether there was any monk who could set him free from his doubt. All the monks said that the only capable monk was the Venerable Moggaliputta Tissa, who stayed on Ahogangā Mountain.

After several attempts, the king succeeded in getting the consent of the Venerable Tissa to return to Pāṭaliputra. When he came back to Pāṭaliputra, the king received him with due respect and provided him with lodging in his pleasure garden. Venerable Moggaliputta Tissa stayed there for seven days. During his stay there the king constantly visited him with exceeding respect and reverence. Elder Tissa instructed him in the teaching of the Buddha. Meanwhile, the king revealed the crime that his minister had done and asked whether he was guilty and responsible for it. The elder Tissa explained to the king that he was not guilty as he had no intention of killing. The king was thoroughly satisfied with the answer and pledged his support to Venerable Tissa to purify the Order.

With the instruction of the Venerable Tissa, King Aśoka summoned each group of monks, who held their own faiths and views separately, to his presence and asked the question: 'What did the Buddha advocate?' (*kiṃ vādi sammāsambuddho?*). Each heretical group answered the question according to their own faiths and views. Thereby the King was able to discriminate fake monks from the true monks. The heretical monks amounting to sixty thousand were forced to disrobe and leave the order. Thereafter, the King asked the same question from the members of the Saṅgha, who were the true believers of the teaching of the Buddha. They answered that the Buddha was an advocate of analysis (*vibhajjavādi sammāsambuddho*). Aśoka consulted the elder Tissa regarding the answer and came to know that the answer was compatible with the teaching of the Buddha. In this way the King was able to eliminate the evil elements from the *Sāsana*.

Venerable Moggaliputta Tissa, knowing that there was no more heretical involvement in the Order, summoned the members of the Saṅgha at Aśokārāma in Pāṭaliputra and performed the *Upasatha* ceremony for the first time after seven years. According to Buddhaghosa, there was a large crowd of monks amounting to six hundred thousand. In this large assembly of monks, elder Moggaliputta Tissa presented the *Kathāvatthupparāṇa*, compiled by him as the fifth book of Abhidhamma Piṭaka of Theravādins. This was really a confirmation and establishment of Theravāda view points as against the various religious and doctrinal views held by different Buddhist schools of the day.

This occasion provided for elder Tissa a golden opportunity to have a council for the establishment and protection of the true teaching of the Buddha. He elected a thousand monks from the assembly, who were well versed with the teaching of the Buddha and endowed with good qualities of the monkhood, as the members of the council. All the facilities were provided by Emperor Aśoka for the council. There was a rehearsal of Dhamma and Vinaya classified into three Piṭakas within the duration of nine months under the presidency of Venerable Moggaliputta Tissa. Buddhaghosa said that the recitation of the Dhamma-Vinaya of this council followed the exact way that the Venerable Mahā Kassapa and Venerable Kakandaputta Yasa had followed respectively in the first and second Buddhist council.

This third Buddhist council occupies a special position in the history of the Theravāda Buddhist tradition in particular and in the history of Buddhism in general. This can be evaluated in

relation to three stages of the activities of the council namely, activities of the pre-council stage, activities of the council stage and the activities of the post council stage.

Pre-council Stage

This stage of the council stands for a prelude to the council. Removal of the corruptive elements was of course a necessary condition for the effectiveness of the council. Therefore, with the advice of the elder Moggaliputta Tissa, Emperor Aśoka took the step to expel the heretical groups from the Sāsana in order to purify the Order of the monks. This was really a need of the Sthāvira tradition of the day for it claimed that it represented the true teaching of the Buddha from the very beginning. Heretical groups mentioned here by Buddhaghosa were nothing but the various Buddhist sects existing during that time. It is the traditional belief that there were eighteen Buddhist sects starting from the second Buddhist council up to the time of third Buddhist council. Any how, the reform of the Order conducted by King Aśoka with the instruction of elder Tissa was a victory of Theravāda Buddhist School over all the other Buddhist sects.

The second important event that took place in this stage of the council was the performance of *Uposatha kamma* by a large crowd of united monks. This provided an occasion for them to express their unity and purity for the first time after seven years.

The presentation of *Kathāvatthupakaraṇa* by Venerable Moggaliputta Tissa in the presence of the large amount of the members of the Saṅgha also can be considered as a very important event especially in the history of Theravāda Buddhist tradition. This treatise of Abhidhamma is reckoned as the fifth book of the Abhidhamma of Sthāviras. Theravādins traditionally believe that with the addition of this book to the Abhidhamma, Theravāda Abhidhamma Piṭaka has achieved its final form. The main purpose of this book was to repudiate opposed views and to establish own views. Elder Tissa had taken here most of the religious and doctrinal views of the various Buddhist sects existing during that time against the Theravāda point of views and pointed out how those views were going against the teachings of the Buddha. For this purpose, the author in most cases had presented quotations from the different discourses of the Buddha in order to show the falsity of the opponent's views.

Some modern scholars mistakenly presented that Venerable Moggaliputta Tissa had presented the *Kathāvatthu* during the council stage. '2500 years of Buddhism' edited by Prof. P.V. Bapat observes: "in the midst of the council, Thera Tissa set forth the *Kathāvatthu-pakaraṇa* wherein heretical doctrines were thoroughly examined and refuted".¹ But Buddhaghosa who given the Theravāda account of third Buddhist council mentioned in his *Samantapāsādikā* that the elder Tissa presented *Kathāvatthu* in the presence of the assembly of the monks before the council.²

Council Stage

The council proper took place during this stage. The Main activity of the council was to recite the three Piṭakas which were believed to contain the words of the Buddha (*Buddhavacana*). As it has been traditionally believed that the Abhidhamma Piṭaka achieved its completion at this

council, it can be supposed that the members of the council confirmed the Kathāvatthupakkaraṇa as one of the books of their Abhidhamma Piṭaka at this stage.

Post council Stage

With the conclusion of the council, Thera Moggaliputta Tissa had taken an extremely valuable step for the propagation of the message of the Buddha even outside of its birth place. After having both purified the Order and pure teaching of the Buddha, Venerable Tissa thought of dispatching missionaries to establish Buddhism in different countries and selected capable monks for this purpose. There is no doubt that the Emperor Aśoka had given his full support to elder Tissa in this respect. It is quite evident from the thirteen rock edicts of Aśoka which, says that the King tried to spread the dhamma not only in his territory or among the people of the border land but also in kingdoms far away. However, according to Buddhaghosa, Venerable Tissa sent off missionaries to different countries in the following way:

- Thera Majjhantika to Kasmira and Gandhara
- Thera Mahadeva to Mahisamandala
- Thera Rakkhita to Vanavasi
- Thera Yonaka Dhammarakkhita to Aparanta
- Thera Maha Dhammarakkhita to Maharattha
- Thera Maha Rakkhita to Yonaka loka
- Thera Majjhima to Himavanta desa
- Thera Sona and Thera Uttara to Suvannabhūmi
- Thera Mahinda together with Theras Itthiya, Uttiya, Sambala and Bhaddasala to Tambapanni (Srilanka)

Each Thera was sent to the relevant country together with four other monks in order to establish Buddhism there. It is believed that Buddhism is rooted in a country when the higher ordination is offered to a person who is born in that country. In a place where there is a lack of monks the higher ordination can be granted by an assembly of four monks.³ That was the reason why four monks were sent along with each leading monk.

Recommended for Reference

1 *Cullavagga sattasatikkhandhaka*

2 *Book the Discipline*, xx, ch.xii

3 *Samantapāsādikā, Bāhira-nidāna, Dutiyasangiti-kathā*

4 Nalinaksha Dutt, *Buddhist sects in India*, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, 1998

5 *2500 Years of Buddhism*, ed. Prof. P.V. Bapat, the Publication division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1956